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SIPDIS

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DIVES  
CAIRO FOR STEVE BONDY

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: JAMES ZOGBY ENGAGES BAHRAINIS AND ADDRESSES ABU  
GHRAIB PRISON ABUSES

1. James Zogby, founder and President of the Arab American Institute and media commentator, visited Bahrain May 10-12, 2004. His speaking tour was co-sponsored by the American Studies Center at the University of Bahrain and the Bahrain Center for Studies and Research, with partial funding from PAS. Zogby spoke to a wide cross section of Bahrainis during two days of well-attended public lectures at the University, the Bahrain Center for Studies and Research(think tank), and round table discussions. Charg hosted a majlis in the DCMR in Zogby's honor for parliamentarians, business representatives, and government officials. The entire Arab diplomatic corps (Ambassadorial rank) attended one of his public lectures - the hotel ballroom was full. Given the timing of his visit, the number one topic of discussion was the treatment of Iraqi POWs in Abu Graib. The lack of progress on resolving the Palestine/Israel problem was also criticized by his audiences. His visit received wide and positive coverage in Bahrain's press.

2. Zogby's visit coincided with a time when American credibility faces harsh challenges due to local concerns about the Abu Ghraib prison abuse. Zogby faced tough crowds and criticism at all of his lectures. One university student, who also studied in the U.S., accused Zogby of "painting a rosy picture" regarding the Arab-American political and social experience in the U.S. A Bahraini government official asked him if the U.S. would ever "have a fair and courageous President who could help solve the problems in the Middle East." A leftist female columnist launched into a monologue at the Charge's majlis about "the American culture of killing." She believes that American culture is one that encourages the disrespect of other peoples, citing Abu Ghraib prison abuse as an example. She asked Zogby to take the following message back to American policymakers: "In order for the U.S. to change its image in the region, it should stop killing people."

3. Zogby did an outstanding job connecting with his audiences. (Comment: The columnist who gave him a hard time at the DCMR later stood in line to have her photograph taken with him.) Zogby encouraged his audiences to be more proactive in shaping American perceptions about Arabs. "The only way to change misperceptions is by creating new perceptions." He called on Bahrainis and all Arabs to put aside their concerns about visa problems and harassment at airports and travel to the U.S. He encouraged them to meet with Americans from all walks of life - not just to visit Disneyland or the East Coast. This idea was particularly well received. A senior MFA official agreed that to initiate real change both Americans and Arabs must see each other clearly through personal interaction. The editor-in-chief of an Arabic daily, who introduced Zogby at one of his lectures, hoped that an American/Arab dialogue could be built on a foundation of the integrity demonstrated by those who came forward about the incidents in Abu Ghraib. The editor praised the U.S. media who made the abuses public, stating, "Let us not forget that these atrocities would have gone completely unnoticed had it not been for the integrity, honesty and decency of America's press."

4. Comment: Zogby is a master; it is hard to overstate the usefulness of his visit. We were fortunate to get him - he told Emboffs that he receives at least ten invitations a week to speak in the U.S. or overseas. He accepted the invitation because he had not visited Bahrain for many years. His integrity as a champion of Arab-American issues gave him hard earned credibility in the eyes of Bahrainis. His message that America is not perfect, but is always working towards that goal, was particularly helpful. N.b., He also provided a needed morale boost for Embassy FSNs, some of whom have been criticized by friends and family for continuing to work for the U.S. following Abu Ghraib. END COMMENT.

FORD